

Media Release

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Save Mount Diablo and sixteen biologists record 273 species during 24 hour “BioBlitz” at new Irish Canyon Property in Clayton. The information will be used to qualify for funding to acquire the property and to devise management strategies.

(Clayton) Conditions were cool and windy Friday and Saturday during a 24 hour period during which Save Mount Diablo (SMD), a San Francisco East Bay Land Trust formed in 1971, conducted a “BioBlitz” on its Irish Canyon property. From 5 pm Friday, April 20 to 5pm Saturday April 21, 16 biologists recorded, trapped and photographed a wide array of species. SMD has entered into a contract to acquire the 320-acre parcel near Clayton. The group has until November 2008 to raise remaining funds.

SMD’s BioBlitz is the first in Northern California and will be expanded in spring 2008 on another property to include the public. Results from the BioBlitz will be used to qualify for funding to complete the purchase of the Irish Canyon property.

Biologists, including from LSA Associates, Nomad Ecological Consulting, and EDAW—normally competitors—all donated their time. Had the biologists been paid, the value of their contribution would exceed \$12,000.

The preliminary count of 273 species (several lists are still being completed) represent a significant snapshot of the property’s biodiversity, especially given that conditions were cool and a little wet. They included 10 mammals; 61 bird species; 3 reptile and 3 amphibian species; 25 invertebrate species including three native ants; and 171 plant species.

Among the most significant finds: three different amphibian species were recorded in one pond, including the Federally threatened California red-legged frog, Western toad, and Pacific tree frog. Three different owl species were recorded, Barn, Western Screech and Great Horned owls, as well as Golden eagles and sharp-shinned hawks. The number of western screech-owls was quite unusual, calling from all around the biologists who camped over night on the property.

A Solitary Sandpiper was observed feeding in a pond; it is considered very unusual, only occasionally seen, and found locally only during migration. Normally sandpipers are shore birds which nest on the ground but Solitary Sandpipers are most often found at ponds and streams, and nest in abandoned songbird nests. A number of Lawrence’s Goldfinch were observed; they are unpredictable and relatively unusual in Contra Costa; Black-throated gray warbler, a migrant passing through the area was found; and oak titmice were sighted, including a nest. They are a good indicator species of the health of oak woodland.

Of plant species, Balsamroot was observed, a locally rare plant known from only 3-5 regions of the East Bay’s 40 plant regions.

Nomad Ecological Consulting set camera traps – but the only animals photographed were California quail and cattle. Although three lines of small mammal traps were set by LSA Associates, mammals are considered underrepresented in the list.

What was missing is as important as what was found. Relatively few insect species and no snake species were found, probably because of cool weather. More importantly, very few ground squirrels were recorded although they are found on adjacent parcels. Ground squirrels are considered a ‘keystone’ species because so many other species rely on them for food and for shelter in their burrows. If more ground squirrels lived on the property it would probably support Federally threatened California tiger salamander and Western burrowing owl. Bobcats and mountain lion are also known from the area. Evidence of feral pigs was found but none were sighted. Fox squirrels were seen; they have largely replaced the native Western Gray squirrels.

The Irish Canyon property was settled by homesteaders and miners beginning in the late 1860s. Cattle grazing, haying, and wood cutting have all affected the property. The BioBlitz species record will help Save Mount Diablo devise management strategies to enhance the property’s ecological health, among them fencing of wetlands and riparian corridors, reforestation of blue oak woodland in several areas, and enhancement of ground squirrel populations.

Save Mount Diablo is a non-profit 501(c)(3) conservation organization, which has been preserving lands on and around Mount Diablo and educating the public to the mountain's natural values since 1971. Preserved lands have increased from 6,788 acres to more than 89,000. Save Mount Diablo continues to raise funds to preserve the remainder of the mountain. Contact: Save Mount Diablo, telephone: (925) 947-3535, facsimile: (925) 947-0642, 1901 Olympic Blvd., Ste. 220, Walnut Creek, CA 94596; www.savemountdiablo.org.

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